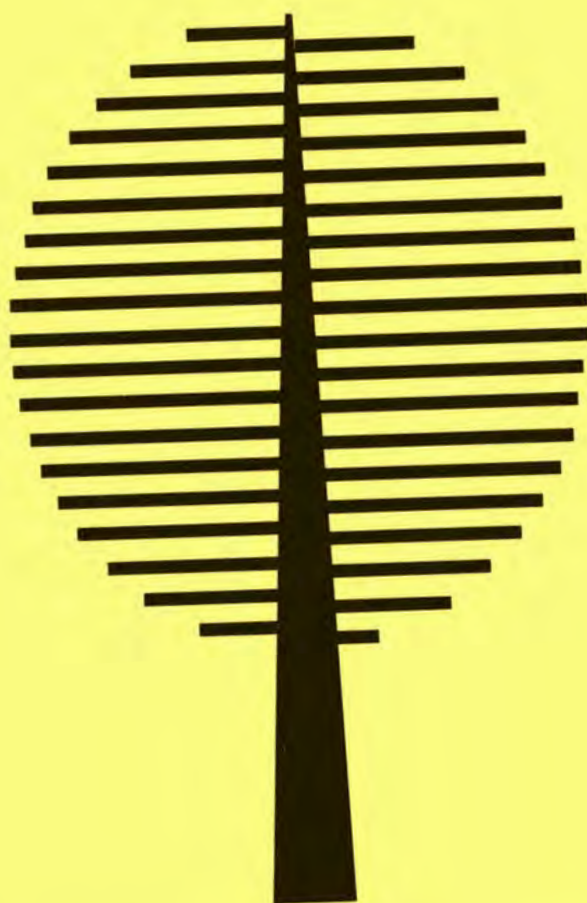


AN APPROACH TO ASSESSING PROGRESS TOWARD SUSTAINABILITY

Tools and Training Series

Reflective Institutions

Eight Characteristics of Institutions That Encourage
and Respond to Learning by Doing



Eric Dudley and Alejandro Imbach

May 1997

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and Respond to Learning by Doing**

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This work was carried out with the aid of a grant from the International Development Research Centre, Ottawa, Canada. These publications are one outcome of the project on assessing progress towards sustainability of IUCN (World Conservation Union) supported by IDRC. The project started by bringing together an international working group to discuss the problems of monitoring and evaluating sustainable development. The group soon realised that there was little point in monitoring and evaluating unless one had an idea of where one wanted to go, and that this understanding could best be developed through a questioning approach. A set of methods and tools, including the early drafts of this booklet, were developed and tested in pilot field trials in Colombia, India and Zimbabwe.

Print production of this booklet has been assisted by grants from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC, Canada) and the Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation (SDC).

About the Series

This series of eight volumes has been developed by a cross-disciplinary team for people interested in assessing progress toward sustainability. Despite differences in emphasis, the materials share a common framework and key principles. We suggest that there are four basic linked steps to understanding sustainable and equitable development:

1. Wholeness. People are an inextricable part of the ecosystem: people and the environment need to be treated together as equally important. Interactions among people and between people and the environment are complex and poorly understood. Thus we need to start by...
2. Asking questions. We must recognize our ignorance, and ask questions. We cannot assess anything unless we know which questions to ask. To be useful — to help make progress — questions need a context. Therefore we need...
3. Reflective institutions. The context for the questioning approach is institutional: groups of people coming together to question and to learn collectively. The process of reflection will, we suggest, lead inevitably to an approach that is...
4. People-focused. People are both the problem and the solution. Our principal arena for action lies in influencing the motivation for human behaviour.

The series starts with the summary document, *Overview of Methods, Tools and Field Experiences: Assessing Progress Toward Sustainability*. The other seven volumes fall into three sets:

Methods of system assessment (people and the ecosystem)

- Participatory and Reflective Analytical Mapping (PRAM)
- Assessing Rural Sustainability
- Planning Action for Rural Sustainability

Methods of self assessment (for organisations and communities to examine their own attitudes, capacities and experiences)

- Reflective Institutions

Tools (for use in conjunction with any of the methods or with other methods)

- Barometer of Sustainability
- Community-based Indicators
- Questions of Survival

Assessing Rural Sustainability and *Planning Action for Rural Sustainability* are designed to be used together. They can also be used with *Participatory and Reflective Analytical Mapping (PRAM)*, although this is conceived as a separate method. *Barometer of Sustainability* and *Community-based Indicators* may be used with any method of system assessment.

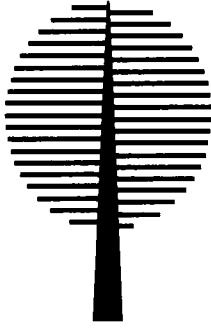
Questions of Survival may be used with any method of system assessment or self assessment.

Methods and tools may well have to be adapted to local circumstances, and some may not be relevant. Solutions must be people-focused to be sustained. We urge the user, when using these documents, to keep in mind the underlying approach:

- recognize the wholeness of people and the ecosystem together;
- decide which questions to ask before searching for indicators; and
- create opportunities for groups to reflect and learn as institutions.

Contents

Why Reflective Institutions?	2
Characteristic 1. Feedback	4
Figure 1. Feedback	5
Characteristic 2. Hypothesis-led Planning	6
Characteristic 3. Strong Horizontal Linkages	8
Figure 2. Horizontal peer group contacts	8
Characteristic 4. Complex Analysis, Simple Actions	10
Figure 3. Comparative points of contact	11
Characteristic 5. Explicit Vision of Past, Present and Future	12
Figure 4. Components of an explicit framework of action	13
Characteristic 6. A Tendency to Breed Reflective Institutions	14
Characteristic 7. The Constructive Identification of Failure	16
Characteristic 8. Spaces for Reflection	18
Reflecting on What...?	20
Figure 5. The chain of influence	21



Why Reflective Institutions?

Learning by doing requires institutional practices that encourage and respond to learning

Traditional planning breaks society down into components parts, each part having a given task to perform. This system, modelled on industrial production techniques, is based on the assumption that we know what we are doing — that we understand both the problems to be solved and the nature of the solutions. The system is designed for efficiency of implementation.

Recent experience of environmental problems demonstrates that we as a society do not understand what we are doing. We require a new way of managing our affairs which recognises and accommodates our own ignorance and incompetence. The system needs to strike a balance between efficient implementation and the careful and practical exploration of ideas.

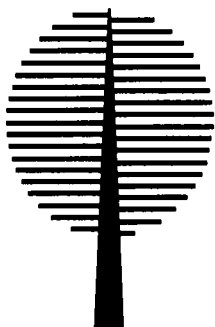
While the idea of learning by doing is not new, the social and institutional implications of such an approach have not been fully appreciated. An institution that learns while it acts — a reflective institution — will necessarily look different from an institution designed solely to act. In a reflective institution, monitoring and evaluation of activities and projects is not so much a discrete task as a way of thinking which must permeate the structure, philosophy and practices of the institution.

Although many development institutions are often thought of as “successful” institutions, there are some recurring themes that illustrate their lack of capacity to reflect and learn:

- **Charismatic non-democratic head.** Despite the rhetoric of participation and democracy, the head is often authoritarian and unchallenged. Often he or she has a high international profile and is popular with funders.
- **High turnover of young people.** The professional staff largely consists of men and women in their twenties who stay for two or three years.
- **The inner cabinet.** There is a small group of three or four long-standing members who effectively guide all policy.

-
- **Us and them.** There is a cultural and practical split between the policy-makers and the field workers.
 - **Marginalised women's section.** Gender issues are simultaneously seen to be recognised and marginalised by being placed in a separate department, isolated from mainstream work.
 - **Marginalised monitoring and evaluation section.** Similarly, monitoring and evaluation are cut off from day-to-day work.
 - **An illusion of multi-disciplinary work.** By having many different professions, an illusion is created of multi-disciplinary work, yet in practice people work in traditional isolated ways.
 - **Over-extended by success.** A successful development institution attracts more funds and its work loses its quality while other less conspicuous institutions remain starved of cash.
 - **Reinventing the wheel.** The same mistakes are made and the same solutions are invented over and over again.
 - **Mystified field workers.** The local field workers often have no idea why they are doing what they are doing.
 - **Lost professionals.** Idealistic professionals find themselves increasingly confused as to what it is they and their institutions are trying to achieve.
 - **Empire-building.** The creation of a bigger and bigger empire becomes an end in itself.
 - **The dusty "resource centre".** A room labelled "resource centre" used by few people and with no clear purpose.

Although there is no set formula, we can start to describe some of the key characteristics that reflective institution must have. These characteristics will reveal themselves in different ways in different types of institutions. Some institutions are large government ministries while others are small informal institutions such as village councils. But irrespective of the scale and focus of the institution, the key characteristics are common to all situations and the underlying principles are fundamentally the same at all levels of power and in all arenas of debate.



Characteristic 1:

Feedback

Experience of action can inform and change policy

A system, whether it be a living organism or a social institution, can only thrive if it can respond and adapt to changing circumstances. It must modify its actions on the basis of an understanding of the impact of its earlier actions. Feedback is the key to any sustainable system. Many institutions do not have adequate mechanisms for feedback.

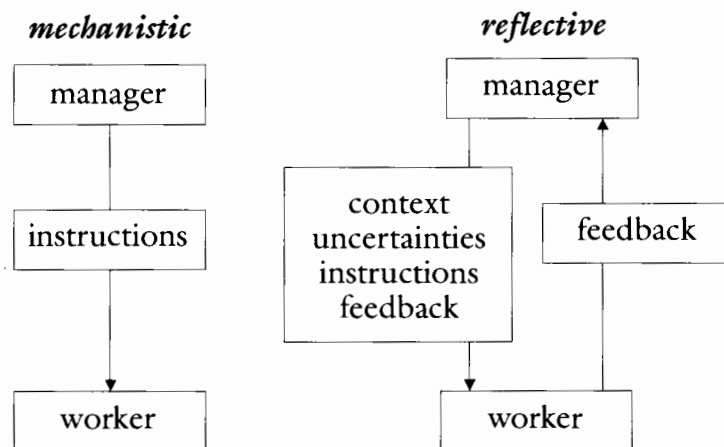
The issue is not necessarily one of hierarchical organisations versus horizontal or cooperative organisations. Totally non-hierarchic decentralised systems can fail to address the larger-scale issues which cross local or sectoral boundaries. Also, they can sometimes fail to take decisions at all. Hierarchic organisations will fail, however, if they are seen purely as a top-down flow of control and command – the model of industrial production and traditional military planning – since the decision-makers will become isolated from reality.

Once the decision-makers of an institution have taken the first key step – the recognition of their own ignorance – the field workers who are exposed to the daily realities of street and village life come to be seen in a new light. They are not simply machines to implement actions but they are the eyes and ears of the institution. They are the greatest knowledge-gathering resource available. Encouraging feedback is not simply to make field-workers feel more part of a team. It is a vital element in a strategy to develop the understanding and efficacy of the institution

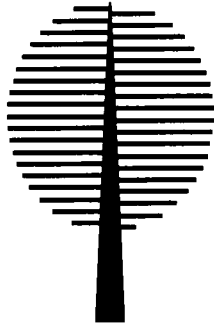
While traditional mechanistic organisations are based on a one-way flow of instructions, a reflective institution will have a two-way flow of information. Encouraging this two-way flow requires more than a suggestion box in the office. To create the environment for feedback, the downward flow of information will need to be richer, containing:

-
- **The context.** Why is the instruction necessary? What is the hypothesis behind the instruction?
 - **Uncertainties.** What are the doubts of the decision-makers; what are the aspects of which they are least certain?
 - **The instructions.**
 - **Feedback on the feedback.** Upward feedback will only be sustained if it becomes a true dialogue, with responses on both sides.

Figure 1. Feedback



The precise mechanisms for implementing feedback will differ between circumstances, but a common element will be the creation of a team spirit in which field workers feel involved in decision-making.



Characteristic 2: Hypothesis-led Planning

Projects to test and improve hypotheses

Conventional project planning states a problem, identifies a solution, then identifies the actions necessary to achieve that solution. There are four unspoken hypotheses:

- that the problem is as stated;
- that the suggested solution is capable of solving the problem;
- that the specified actions will result in that solution being achieved; and
- that we are capable of executing those actions.

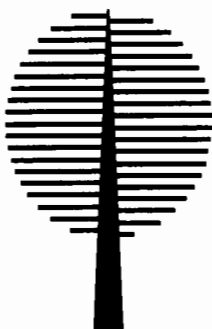
In many circumstances, any or all of these hypotheses may be open to question. In hypothesis-led planning, the hypotheses are made explicit. This apparently simple procedure of exposing to all the ideas behind the proposals can prove to be both difficult and highly revealing. Often the link between the stated objectives and the solutions proposed can be shown to be highly questionable. The process can also reveal how little we really know about the problem. It can reveal previously unquestioned assumptions and suggest new lines for enquiry and it can change priorities.

Often in conventional planning and management practice we identify the critical path and a “tree” of actions to reveal the dependence of one action on earlier actions. A similar exercise can be done with hypotheses. For any proposed action it is possible to list the key hypotheses, or assumptions, that form the context for the proposal. Behind these hypotheses there will be further hypotheses.

For instance, many projects dealing with environmental issues identify social behaviour as the problem, such as cutting trees for firewood, and then suggest a programme of education as the solution. Faced with such a proposal, or an actual live project, the first three questions we can ask are:

-
- What is the evidence that the demand for firewood is the principal cause of deforestation, or how can we test this hypothesis?
 - Similarly, what is the evidence that people are ignorant of the effects of their actions?
 - What reason do we have to believe that education will change behaviour? Is it necessary? Is it enough?

Often, indeed almost always, it is not possible to come up with definitive answers to these kinds of questions prior to a project. The point is not that institutions should switch to research rather than action but that all programmes of action should be seen as vehicles for testing ideas and developing knowledge to inform the next course of action.



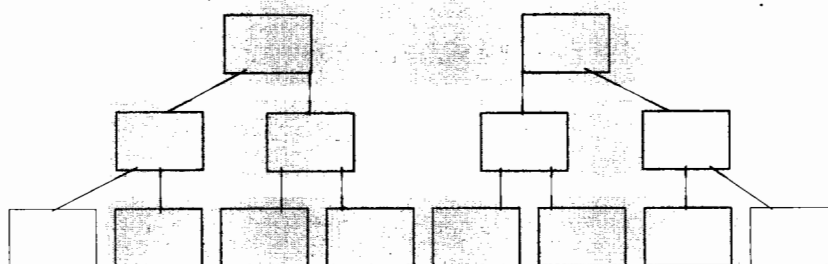
Characteristic 3:

Strong Horizontal Linkages

Communication between disciplines, departments and institutions is encouraged

It has long been recognised that the hierarchical structures of traditional management are not conducive to innovation. In all fields, including development, peer-group networking and multi-disciplinary teamwork are being encouraged.

Figure 2. Horizontal peer group contacts



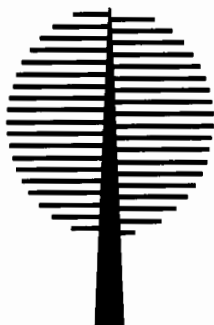
In practice, however, a multi-disciplinary team often appears to be nothing more than a fashionable name for a group of individuals carrying on as before in their professional pigeonholes. For professionals to work in a multi-disciplinary fashion requires them to address questions and issues outside of their professional competence and to be supportive to other professions addressing issues of their own. Such action runs contrary to the traditionally valued objective of seeking excellence in specialist areas and the less worthy but equally real pressures to defend one's territory against invaders.

Similarly, peer group networking, while theoretically desirable, can easily become a battleground for competition for limited resources, with each sector or profession arguing for a greater importance to be placed on itself rather than generating a pressure for a broader and balanced holistic view.

Problems of ego and competition are difficult to overcome especially since these characteristics are also important engines for innovation and progress. New systems of reward, professional development, and power need to be established which encourage rather than obstruct interdisciplinary work.

A climate conducive to really constructive exchanges of views and experience is only likely to emerge through promoting the following:

- **Generalists.** Multi-disciplinary teamwork is not enough. There need to be more individuals who can think and act in a cross-disciplinary fashion. Increasingly, excellence needs to be judged in terms of success in striking pragmatic compromises between conflicting pressures.
- **Small work groups.** Professionals should be organised in small multi-disciplinary teams rather than working in isolation. The teams should be kept small to encourage real participation and team-building.
- **Geographic focus of power.** There needs to be a shift of power away from thematic sectors to geographic locations. Priorities need to be determined locally in the light of the overall picture rather than by sectoral agenda. Within an institution, this implies decentralisation and greater decision-making in the field.
- **Specialist support rather than direction.** Specialist agencies, departments, and professionals need to become providers of services, advice, and information rather than initiators of sectoral programmes.



Characteristic 4:

Complex Analysis, Simple Actions

An holistic view of the total system should be combined with focused action

It seems that in all fields of endeavour, and certainly in development, people are concluding that there is a need for holistic thinking. It has been realised that everything is related to everything else.

Environmental issues are inextricably linked with development issues and both are enmeshed with cultural, economic, and political concerns. Yet to say that one has to think of everything is, in effect, to say nothing. If we have to have a complete world model before we can take actions we would all be permanently paralysed.

There is little doubt that part of the current problem of unsustainability results from the largely Western tradition of thematic specialisation, which has led both to professional excellence and a loss of the overview. Our challenge is how to acquire the overview while not losing excellence.

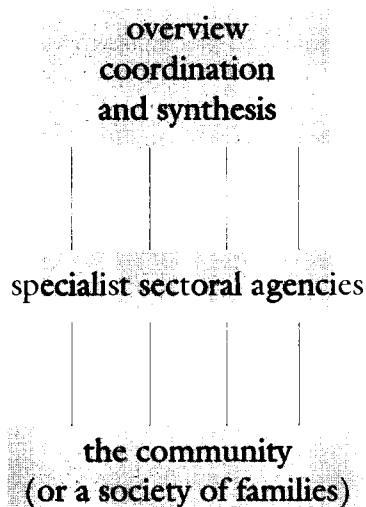
The recognition of the need to develop an understanding of the complexity of the totality is often interpreted as a need for complex plans of action. The result is frequently chaos. We need to find ways of developing a sophisticated analysis of the complexity which can inform simple, effective, and achievable action.

On the previous page it was suggested that decision-making should have a geographic focus rather than thematic and that specialist agencies should offer support rather than direction. In practice, this means a move away from a process in which each member of the global family of thematic UN agencies has its own programme of implementation, toward one in which an emphasis is placed on developing and supporting strong local institutions. The real strength of these institutions must lie in detailed local knowledge combined with skills of synthesis. In particular, they need to foster the abilities to:

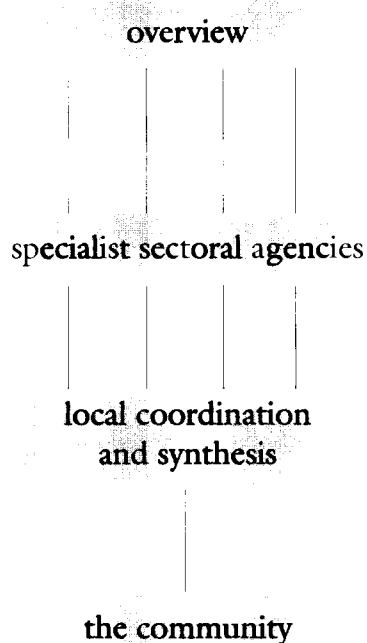
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- **Frame questions holistically.** The questions which projects are designed to ask must be clear and specific but they should be framed in terms of a broad understanding of the context.
 - **Find the appropriate level of synthesis.** Different issues are best tackled at different levels. Many institutions become stuck at one level, working through a decision-making process with one group of actors. Institutions need to become more adept at identifying the appropriate level at which to work for different issues (e.g. community, municipal, regional).

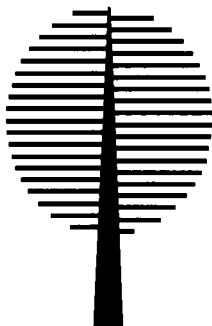
Figure 3. Comparative points of contact

specialist implementation



the “generalist” single point of contact





Characteristic 5: Explicit Vision of Past, Present and Future

Institutional memory, understanding, and objectives are shared and debated

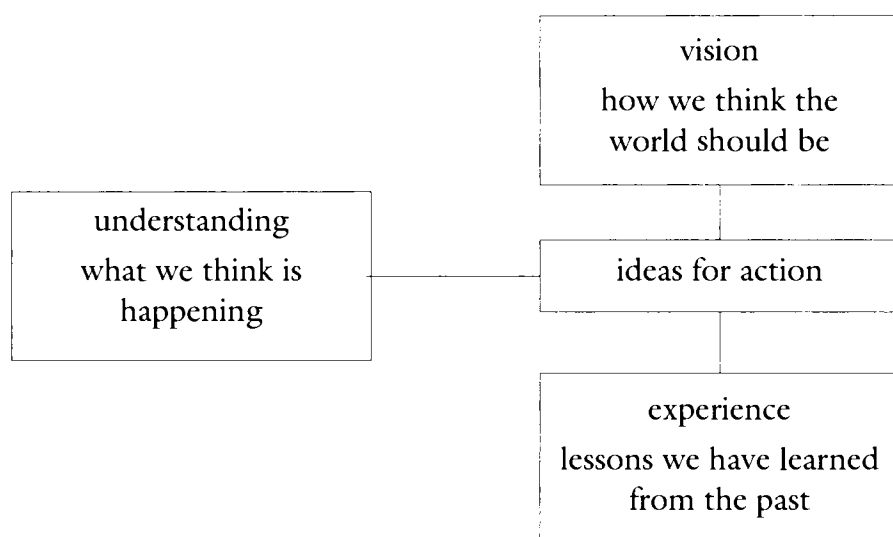
Sustainable and equitable development is not a science with textbooks and inviolable rules. As such it is hard to describe experiences and pass them on as useful lessons which apply to different times and places. Frequently, in one location or institution the same mistakes are made and the same lessons learned over and over again. To an extent this is not only inevitable, it is also valuable. If the most powerful learning experiences are one's own mistakes then it is necessary for people to make mistakes for themselves.

However, if an institution is to progress it must have mechanisms for learning and slowly expanding a framework of commonly shared beliefs. Generally, this "framework" takes the form of the minds of a handful of key people who formed the institution and have stayed with it over a number of years. The key understandings are largely unspoken and stem from their common history. When these people move on, the folk memory of the institution is lost. And if they do not move on, the younger newcomers are inevitably excluded from this shadowy understanding. If the institutional "mind" is to become the common property of its members there must be formal mechanisms for recording on paper the institutional "memory" consisting of:

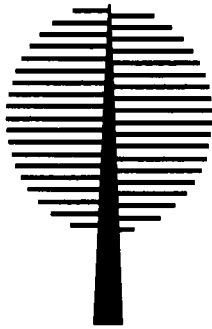
- **The Past:** The history of the institution's experiences.
- **The Present:** The model of the context in which the institution works and way in which it believes that the institution is working within that context.
- **The Future:** The vision of what the future should be like and how it might be achieved.

In a busy institution, the process of such formal recording may seem a tedious diversion from real work. But over the longer term an explicitly stated and shared vision of what the institution is trying to do will save time by making work more effective and directed.

Figure 4. Components of an explicit framework of action



The description, documentation, and constant revision of this framework should be the central task of those responsible for monitoring and evaluation in an institution. Such knowledge cannot be frozen in a single publication produced at a given time. An institution should have an evolving central document which can form a flexible but permanent reference point for the work of the institution.



Characteristic 6: A Tendency to Breed Reflective Institutions

Beneficiaries and participants are encouraged to take control of their own projects

A reflective attitude to work will only evolve when people feel that their reflections can result in change. In large institutions and programmes many of the people involved feel powerless to change policies and actions. Decision-making is too remote from those who have something useful to contribute to the decisions.

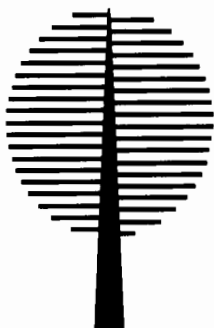
A reflective institution will try, at all levels, to ensure that nobody is too far removed from decision-making. Within a development institution, a reflective process will reveal itself in a policy of decentralisation in which each component has its own arena for taking initiatives and determining policy. The workers involved are more likely to dedicate themselves to the work when they can see that their opinions are influencing policies that directly affect their own work. With greater involvement at all levels there will be a qualitative improvement which will more than offset any loss of control from the top.

The inevitable conclusion of a process of decentralisation is the separation of institutional components which are viable entities in their own right. In industry, many of the more progressive large companies have recognised the benefits of encouraging employees to break away and form their own companies which can sell services back to the original company. In development, it is still more common for institutions to grow and grow as they try to expand their empires.

The process of decentralisation is not confined to the institution itself, it also affects the intended beneficiaries of development. Despite all the talk about community participation in recent years, most development projects involve external institutions directing or implementing work at the community level. A reflective development institution will encourage communities to form their own institutions which can define and direct their own projects. These in turn should be encouraged to help generate others within the community,

such as production cooperatives, street committees and the like which, to some extent, can control their own destiny.

A development process based on reflective institutions will consist of large numbers of highly motivated small institutions which communicate with each other, exchanging information based on their own local knowledge and analysis.



Characteristic 7: The Constructive Identification of Failure

Errors and failures are seen as important resources for learning

There is a conspiracy of success which prevents us from learning from failure. This conspiracy operates at all levels, from northern governments and aid agencies down to local field workers and communities. Everybody has an interest in believing that projects have been successful. Partly this is natural human ego but it also reflects a desire to survive in a competitive climate. Communities need to encourage development institutions to return, field workers need to meet targets to keep their jobs, local institutions need to please the funders, and funders need to convey an image of money well-spent.

Yet it is clear that many development projects do fail. There can be various reasons for failure but usually they relate to some failure of understanding. That understanding may be with regard to the context in which one is working or with the process by which the project has been implemented. Either way, the lack of understanding revealed is a potentially important piece of knowledge which can point to future lines of inquiry and changes of policy. Yet, so long as funding is seen as dependent on success the knowledge of failure – the very knowledge which can provide the greatest insights – will be suppressed.

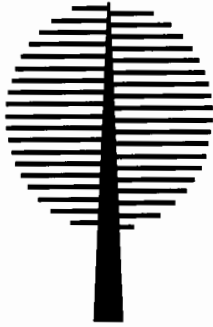
We are faced with a dilemma since, clearly, there have to be criteria to use when choosing between projects, field workers and communities; and those criteria must have something to do with determining the likelihood of success. Success and failure cannot be ignored, but the constructive identification of failure is an integral part of the process of feedback. Failure should not be seen as an unexpected calamity but as an expected product of a reflective learning process. The absence of failure is suspicious.

The only real solution is a long-term relationship of mutual trust between patron and benefactor; whether international agency with local institution, institution with employed field worker, or field worker with community.

In such a relationship, where there is faith in eventual success, immediate failures can be accommodated and learnt from. However, such supportive relationships take time to evolve and so there need to be other mechanisms to identify and understand failure. Such mechanisms can also help to build the desired relationship of trust.

In project reporting, monitoring and evaluation, the identification and constructive analysis of failures or unexpected consequences should be encouraged and rewarded. The absence of any reported failures should be challenged. The idea of failure should be broadened beyond the confines of the project components so that project workers are encouraged to ask themselves whether the project is actually addressing the right question. Is the most important aspect of a project what it is not doing rather than what it is doing? Are the project beneficiaries the ones most in need? And is the project meeting their greatest need?

Many field workers know that one of the most difficult things to do can be to get a community group to usefully criticise a project or institution. Again, the only long-term answer is a relationship of trust but communities can be encouraged to make comparisons between projects, to say which was better and so why the other was worse.



Characteristic 8: Spaces for Reflection

**Opportunities for reflection are created
and maintained rather than left to chance**

The process of making an institution reflective is not a one-off event; it requires continuous attention. Making reflection happen requires more than a general commitment to the principle. Specific times need to be set aside to focus and stimulate the reflective process. Unless such spaces are created and maintained, it is likely that reflective activities will be pushed aside under the pressure of day-to-day work.

The nature of such spaces will depend on the size and type of institution, but there are likely to be several different sorts of space required. For instance, it is quite common for small organisations, or teams within organisations, to have planning meetings or, maybe, less formal group lunches every week. But precisely because of their frequency these types of meetings can rapidly become a tedious formality. Such meetings may need to be supplemented or replaced by less frequent but more focused meetings in which people can really get away from their daily activity and consider the broader picture.

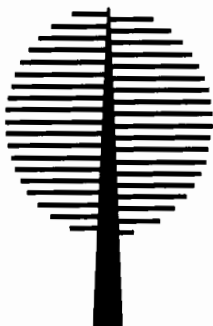
A useful focus for such meetings can be failure. On the previous pages the constructive identification of failure was identified as an important characteristic of reflection. Since failure is so often swept under the carpet, a forum in which the implications of specific failures can be talked through may be a valuable step in breaking the conspiracy of success.

Some types of space for reflection may not be in the form of meetings. They may be written. In many institutions, while much time, effort, and money are devoted to producing reports, there is little opportunity for text which asks questions and explores ideas. Some institutions produce journals to foster academic debate. Valuable as these can be, the format of the “academic paper” can still be too restrictive. Within institutions and work groups, the short one or two-page photocopied note may be a simple but important vehicle for recording and sharing ideas and observations. Other types of spaces for reflection include such things as group field visits to projects of other institutions.

Institutional reflection is the responsibility of everybody in the institution, but if reflection is to be sustained someone must take on the responsibility for managing the spaces for reflection. While it is widely recognised that development institutions should have monitoring and evaluation departments, the scope of their activities is often defined too narrowly. Evaluation of projects and programmes is impossible without an understanding of the frame of reference against which activities can be evaluated. The process of reflection is about developing this understanding.

The people responsible for monitoring and evaluation should be responsible for creating and maintaining the spaces for reflection. This does not mean that the monitoring and evaluation team should become the policy-making team, but rather that it should facilitate the process of institutional learning. The team should take a lead in identifying the following:

- practical mechanisms for encouraging reflection;
- cross-sectoral or cross-team groups which could usefully reflect together;
- gaps in understanding;
- themes emerging from current experience; and
- people with similar experiences.



Reflecting on What...?

Developing a clear vision to give direction to reflection

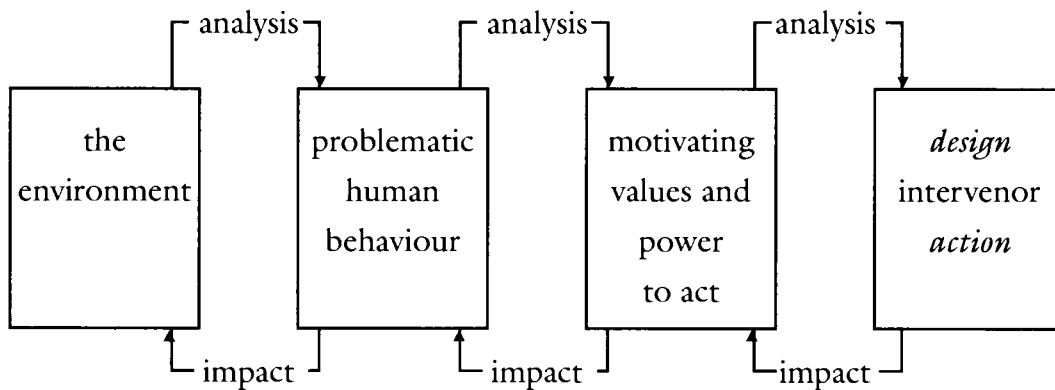
There is little point developing reflective institutions unless we have some broad idea of what we are trying to achieve. The assumption is that we are all trying to foster a process of development which is both sustainable and equitable, but there is confusion at all levels as to what this might be like. In a companion booklet, *Questions of Survival*, we have prepared a set of basic questions around key issues that are intended as a possible starting point for trying to clarify our objectives:

- **Change.** In what way is your environment changing?
- **Problems.** What problems have resulted from the changes and which have always been there?
- **Victim.** How is your environment being affected by others in ways which seem out of your control?
- **Culprit.** How are you affecting other people's lives?
- **Knowledge.** Who knows what about your environment?
- **Community.** Who else shares your problems or has similar ones?
- **Values.** What are your aspirations?

Using these questions, we suggest, is likely to reveal how little we really know, and can help to focus our future work on key unknowns.

Beyond this, a further step can be taken by starting to work from the basic hypothesis that the problems of unsustainable and inequitable development are caused by human behaviour and that the solutions lie in influencing that behaviour. In this hypothesis, human behaviour is seen as determined by the values and the power to act of the various actors concerned. The role of the intervening development institutions is to influence both the motivating values and enabling powers of people.

Figure 5. The chain of influence



Given this simple theoretical framework, there is ample scope for a truly reflective institution that is prepared to get beyond superficial symptoms in order to explore the underlying causes and the possible cures.

Founded in 1948 as the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, the IUCN brings together States, Government agencies and a diverse range of non-governmental organisations in a unique world partnership: over 900 members in all, spread across some 136 countries. As a Union, IUCN seeks to influence, encourage and assist societies throughout the world to conserve the integrity and diversity of nature and to ensure that any use of natural resources is equitable and ecologically sustainable. The Union builds on the strengths of its members, networks and partners to enhance their capacity and to support global alliances to safeguard natural resources at local, regional and global levels.

The Strategies for Sustainability Programme of IUCN works to strengthen strategic planning, policy and implementation skills aimed at sustainable development at global, national and local levels. Working with networks of strategy practitioners from member governments, partner institutions and NGOs, the Programme assists in the conceptual development and analysis of experience in strategies, the development of a range of strategic planning and action planning skills, and improved methods of assessing human and ecosystem wellbeing.



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